

# Advent 2007

# Leader

## HAIL THE HEAVEN BORN

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## How to Use This Leader's Guide

### PREPARING TO LEAD THE SESSIONS

You have in your hands the basic tools you need to lead each session effectively. How, though, do you use them to create a vibrant session custom-tailored for your group? You will find it useful to read through all five sessions to get an overview of the spiritual journey you will be taking as you study *Hail the Heaven Born*. If you will team-teaching, you and your team will want to agree on assignments. Then you will want to focus on whichever session(s) you will be leading.

The first and most important part of weekly session planning is preparing your heart and mind to receive the message that God has for you. Yes, there is factual information to be studied; but save that for later and allow God to speak to you through these Scriptures.

Read each lection devotionally. linger over a word or a phrase that captures your attention. Pray that God will show you how this part of the Bible story connects to your story. Let God's Word enlighten and inspire, challenge and convict you. Remember, though, that what God wants to say to you through these Scriptures is possibly different from the word that God has for someone else in the group. Encourage group members to read meditatively as they prepare for each week's session so they might discern God's word for themselves.

Next, study each of the Bible passages to be explored for the week. You need not be a Bible

scholar to lead this series; but you must carefully read each of the passages, preferably from more than one translation of the Bible. Use Bible information in the student book and this leader's guide to help you understand who the original listeners or hearers were, what their situation was, how the church later interpreted this passage, and what it might mean for Christians today. To do this effectively, you will find it useful to have a good study Bible such as *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* to help you figure out unfamiliar ideas or references. These particular Bibles are recommended because both use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is the translation normally quoted in **SCRIPTURES FOR THE CHURCH SEASONS**.

As you interpret the passages, keep in mind, especially when dealing with the Old Testament, that these Hebrew Scriptures had, and continue to have, meaning for God's Jewish covenant people even if Christians have made connections between a particular passage and Jesus the Messiah. Think about meanings for both rather than skipping immediately to a Christian interpretation. Even as you study the New Testament, recall that authors wrote their Gospels and letters to specific people in specific locations often with specific concerns and problems. While it is tempting for us to generalize their meanings and apply them "as is" to the contemporary church, we need to recognize not only similarities but also differ-

ences between the churches we read about in the Bible and the churches we attend today.

Once you feel that you have a grasp of the Bible readings, select the options from the learning menu that you believe will be most effective for your group members. As you make your selections, keep in mind your time frame. Always plan more activities than you expect to need. You can delete some if time runs short; but try to do at least one activity for each of the five goals listed in the session outline so as to create a well-balanced, comprehensive session.

Also keep in mind the area in which you have to work. If you are in close quarters with other groups, you may not be able to sing; but you could ask group members to read the hymn in unison or responsively.

Now that you have created your customized session plan, make sure you have the supplies you need. In general, you will need Bibles (preferably several translations, though do encourage group members to bring their own Bibles), pencils and paper, newsprint and markers, and hymnals. If you have them on hand, references such as Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and atlases enrich the learning experience. If particular items, such as art supplies, are needed for an activity, you will find that information noted with that activity. You may want to have a worship table with a Bible, candles, an Advent wreath, or other symbols. If you choose to use a cloth, remember that blue and purple call to mind Jesus' royalty.



On the day your group meets, plan to arrive early to set up the room. Your preparations will help the session run smoothly.

Doing whatever you can do to create a warm, inviting atmosphere where group members feel welcomed and part of the group will not only build community but will also enhance the learning experience. People are generally freer to participate in discussions, ask questions, and give their opinions when they feel that they are in a safe, accepting environment. One way to create such an environment is to make sure group members know one another. If you are using this resource as a short-term study with group members who do not normally study together, be sure to provide time during the first session (and thereafter, should newcomers join) to allow for introductions. Another way to create such an environment is to randomly pair students as prayer partners for the duration of the study.

During the session, be sure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Agree with the group as you begin that it is acceptable to disagree respectfully with one another. Recognize that students are in different places in their faith journeys. What seems like a basic question to one person may be an entirely new thought for someone else. Welcome all questions. Answer based on your study of the material and/or your experiences. You might also leave the answer open-ended and use all the resources available to help guide group members to discover the answers they seek, encouraging them to view a variety of perspectives.

## ADDITIONAL READINGS

*First Sunday:* Psalm 122

*Second Sunday:* Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

*Third Sunday:* Psalm 146:5-10

*Fourth Sunday:* Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

*Christmas Eve:* Psalm 96

## HYMNS

*First Sunday:* "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," "People, Look East," "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light"

*Second Sunday:* "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Hail to the Lord's Anointed," "Toda la Tierra (All the Earth Is Waiting)"

*Third Sunday:* "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates," "En el Frío Invernal (Cold December Flies Away)"

*Fourth Sunday:* "To a Maid Engaged to Joseph," "Emmanuel, Emmanuel," "Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine" (*The Faith We Sing*)

*Christmas Eve:* "Once in Royal David's City," "What Child Is This," "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing"

## PRAYERS

### *First Sunday*

You have called us, loving God, to make a journey from the darkness into the light of your beloved Son. As we look ahead to his return in glory, empower us to be alert and prepared for his coming. Amen.

### *Second Sunday*

All the earth is waiting for you, precious Lord. You came first to a poor Jewish family to bring the reign of God near to all. We celebrate your life on earth, O Christ, even while we continue to await your return as the righteous judge. Empower us to bear fruit that is pleasing to you as we live in this space between the already-here and the-yet-to-come. Amen.

### *Third Sunday*

We come seeking your face, holy God; but we do not always know exactly what we are looking for. Make yourself known to us in the one who needs healing, the one who longs to hear good news in the midst of oppression. Empower us to respond as Jesus would. Amen.

### *Fourth Sunday*

Most holy and mysterious God, you come to us in ways that surprise and challenge us. A prophecy fulfilled, a dream that turns our carefully crafted plans upside down speak to us of your presence in our lives. Envelop us in your gracious love that we might feel your constant presence in Jesus. Amen.

### *Christmas Eve*

Gracious God, we give you praise for the love you sent to us at Christmas in the Babe of Bethlehem. Let his humility remind us that we continually stand in awe, for in this matchless gift you reconciled us unto yourself. Empower us to proclaim this good news to others; in Jesus' name. Amen.

SCRIPTURES FOR THE CHURCH SEASONS  
*Hail the Heaven Born Leader's Guide*

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# 1 Traveling Backwards Toward Bethlehem

### BIBLE BACKGROUND

#### Isaiah 2:1-5

Although Isaiah's vision is attributed to "Isaiah son of Amoz," note that Micah 4:1-3 is almost identical. Thus, scholars have suggested that both of these 8<sup>th</sup>-century-B.C. prophets quoted an even earlier oracle.

The vision announced the promise of salvation.

It was not yet reality

but would be so "in days to come" (Isaiah 2:2). Zion, "the mountain of the LORD's house" (verse 2), would first be raised up. This low hill in Jerusalem on which the Temple stood would become "the highest of mountains" (verse 2), at least in theological terms. Here, God would meet "all the nations" (verse 2). These pilgrims would come not under duress; rather they would come willingly to learn God's ways. International politics comes into view as God serves as judge and arbitrator among the nations. The people, however, are the ones who will decide to transform their weapons into tools.

The prophet envisioned a new world and a new way of being. In this new world, God will reign; and people will seek God's teachings so as to walk in God's ways. When this day comes, peace will prevail because the people who have learned God's ways will no longer need to rely on war to resolve disputes.

Isaiah's promise of a peaceful future that includes all the nations is indeed good news. While the prophet did not specify a time for the fulfillment of this vision, we,

along with the house of Jacob, are called to take steps now in God's ways by walking in the light. Salvation and a new world are undoubtedly on the horizon.

*Scriptures for  
Advent:  
The First Sunday  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
Romans 13:11-14  
Matthew 24:36-44*

#### Romans 13:11-14

Writing to the church in Rome, the apostle

Paul repeated themes that we heard in Isaiah: *Time*. The day of the Lord is drawing near. Paul was not speaking about clocks or calendars. He was speaking of *kairos*, the time when something has reached its fullness. The day of the Lord—the day of the last judgment—is breaking upon us. Since "the night is far gone" (13:12), it is almost dawn. We are closer to the promise of salvation than when we first believed. Consequently, our lifestyles need to reflect our recognition that the reign of God has drawn near to us.

*Light*. Christians need to move away from the "works of darkness" (verse 12) and live in God's light. Paul listed negative behaviors that are unacceptable. "Works of darkness" connect night, darkness, and evil actions. "Quarreling and jealousy" (verse 13) are not limited to certain hours of darkness, but Paul clearly lumped these together with behaviors that abuse one's body

and the bodies of others. Paul admonished believers to "put on the armor of light" (verse 12) and "live honorably" (verse 13). In Isaiah, the people learn to walk in God's light by means of instruction. In Romans 13:14, however, Paul calls us to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" so that we can live in the light. This "putting on" reminds us of our baptism. Because we belong to Christ, we recognize that he is able to defend us from evil.

Whereas in Isaiah 2 the fulfillment of God's promise could only be anticipated in some yet-to-be determined time, in Romans Paul makes clear that the time is now. God's promise is being fulfilled in Christ. We need to engage in the fruitful discipleship that Christ requires of us.

#### Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus spoke about the need for watchfulness. We must "keep awake" (24:42) for we know that the Lord is coming, but we do not know when. Even Jesus has no idea when that will be. The time for his return is known only to God.

Much of this passage is devoted to illustrating the surprise of Christ's return. The first example of such surprise is the people of Noah's day. We do not know what people thought about Noah's fantastic building project, but we are aware that they continued with their daily routines while he was making preparations for the coming flood that would execute God's judgment.



When the floodwaters rose, those who were unprepared were simply swept away.

In a second example, two people are in a field, presumably working, when suddenly only one is standing where the two had been. The third example is similar. Two women are grinding, and suddenly one is no longer present. Finally, Jesus used the example of a thief who comes at night to rob a home. If the homeowner had any idea that this unexpected intrusion into his home was imminent, he would have stayed alert and protected his home.

Jesus called his followers to be ready for his return "at an unexpected hour" (verse 44). What, though, does it mean to "be ready"? Surely, readiness includes vigilance. We must be alert and prepared to meet the Lord at any time. Based on the examples Jesus gave us, we can be confident that he will break in upon our ordinary routines. Therefore, we need to be careful about what those routines are.

Once the time comes, things will happen so quickly and so catastrophically (verse 29) that we will have no time to get ready. Now, says Jesus, is the time to watch, wait, and prepare for his return.

#### LEARNING MENU

*To prepare to embark on the Advent journey.*

**A** Explore Advent as a time of preparation

Materials: newsprint and markers

Invite group members to pray for wisdom and clarity as you begin this Advent journey. Lift up any special prayer concerns.

Use information from "What Time Is It?" in "How to Use This Leader's Guide" to help group members understand the purpose for Advent and the focus of each of the four weeks. You will want to look at this information prior to the session and determine how you might best present it.

Invite group members to talk about how they see Advent as a time of preparation. If the group is large, maximize participation by forming groups of three or four. If you work in groups, post the following questions on newsprint:

For whom or what are they preparing? What kinds of preparations do they make? How do these preparations enhance their relationship with Christ? What stumbling blocks do they encounter, especially as they seek to prepare spiritually? How do they strive to overcome these obstacles?

**B** Discuss memories of Christmas

Materials: Christmas cookies and napkins, tree ornaments, cards, Advent wreath, bell, figure from a crèche, sprig of holly or pine, and other items that people often use to prepare for Christmas

Note that the sight, sound, or smell of an object can bring to mind memories of long ago. This phenomenon seems to be true especially in relation to memories of Christmases past.

Form teams of three or four. Give each team one non-edible item to pass around. Invite group members to touch, see, hear, or smell each item. Then encourage group members to tell brief

stories of memories that at least one of the items evokes for them. Invite group members to discuss how these objects that have such special meaning have helped, and continue to help, them prepare for the coming of Christ.

Pass around the cookies and napkins so group members can enjoy a brief fellowship time as you begin.

*To survey spiritual landmarks (Isaiah 2:1-5).*

**A** Walk the pilgrim's team

Materials: sheets of paper and pens

Ask group members to close their eyes and imagine what Isaiah was seeing as you read aloud Isaiah 2:1-5. As an option, if possible in your space, invite group members to walk around the area while you read as if they, too, are moving toward the mountain. Encourage those who are able to move as if they are straining to climb this mountain.

Talk with group members about what they imagined and/or experienced as they walked. Then suggest that they point out images in the text that are inspiring, surprising, or puzzling. Use the Bible Background information for this passage to unpack those images. Discuss the following questions:

How would you describe the world that the prophet envisioned? How does it compare to the one you currently know? What would happen if "all the nations" (Isaiah 2:2) decided to "beat their swords into plowshares" (Isaiah 2:4)? (While the obvious answer is that wars will cease, push the question by thinking about international relations, budget priorities, care for the marginalized, and so on.)

As we await this promised salvation, in what ways can you lead others by walking in the light? What does this kind of walking look like?

**B** Draw maps of spiritual journeys

Materials: unlined paper, pencils, newsprint, and markers

## SESSION OUTLINE

*1. To prepare to embark on the Advent journey.*

*2. To survey spiritual landmarks (Isaiah 2:1-5).*

*3. To recognize what time it is (Romans 13:11-14).*

*4. To practice watchfulness (Matthew 24:36-44).*

*5. To reflect on preparedness for Advent.*



# 2

## O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree

### BIBLE BACKGROUND

#### Isaiah 11:1-10

In last week's session from Isaiah 2, we saw a prophetic vision about God's coming reign of peace, an announcement of salvation. Today's verses from Chapter 11 continue to speak about a peaceful kingdom, one that would come from Jesse, King David's father. Early Jewish readers likely heard echoes concerning an ideal future king in the use of the word *branch*, also found in Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; and Zechariah 3:8; 6:12. As the young Christian church applied this passage to Jesus, the phrase a "shoot ... from the stump of Jesse" became particularly important.

Isaiah 11:2-3a, which may remind Christians of the gifts of the Spirit, describes this Davidic king. Jewish readers would have been reminded of God's Spirit resting upon King Saul (1 Samuel 10:6) and King David (1 Samuel 16:13). These qualities would enable the king to fulfill obligations to the people, as outlined in Isaiah 11:3b-5. Notice how important the trait of righteousness is. The Hebrew word used here may also be translated "justice." The ideal king is to have great concern for the poor and marginalized. A modern slogan "If you want peace, work for justice" aptly describes the style of this king

In verses 6-9, we move from a description of the king to the peaceful kingdom over which this ruler will preside. Nature itself is transformed. Creatures who would

naturally hurt and fear one another now live together in harmony. All the earth knows the Lord.

Finally, verse 10 moves us again to the future. This idyllic kingdom does not yet exist but will come "on that day." When it

does come, the messianic king who has come from Jesse will become the focal point of the world, for all people will come to "inquire of him," or as the New International Version puts it, "will rally to him."

#### Romans 15:4-13

The theme of harmonious living sounds again in Romans 15:5. Paul had been writing about how Christians are to live, and he recognized that there are differing opinions among believers (Romans 14). Still, in 15:6, he calls for unity in glorifying God. Such togetherness stems from the people's hope in God.

As he moved into the next portion of his letter, Paul argued for the welcome of all people—Jews and Gentiles. *Welcome* is not meant to imply a polite greeting but rather a sincere acceptance of one another just as Christ accepts each of us. So there will be no mistake as to God's intention to include Gentiles among

the saved, Paul quoted four passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Romans 15:9 comes from Psalm 18:49 and echoes in 2 Samuel 22:50. The source of Romans 15:10 is Deuteronomy 32:43. Psalm 117:1 supports Romans 15:11. Romans 15:12 will look familiar as it is rooted in Isaiah 11:10, which we have already studied. From Romans 15:9-12, the word *Gentiles* is used six times, further signaling that Paul's ministry was on track and in keeping with God's plan of salvation for all.

The last verse of this passage draws together the attributes of hope, joy, and peace—all of which summarize the new life of a Christian.

Looking at this passage through the lens of Advent, we are drawn to hope, which is a major emphasis this liturgical season. Verse 4 considers the hope that we have as we read and learn from the Scriptures. Verse 8 reminds us not only that Jesus fulfilled promises but also that the patriarchs must have continued to have hope that these promises would come to pass. As we saw in the lecture from Isaiah, Romans 15:12 refers to the king who will arise from Jesse's line, the one in whom the Gentiles will hope. This hope is not simply wishful thinking, for verses 5 and 13 make clear that "the God of steadfastness and encouragement" is also "the God of hope."

#### Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptizer's proclamation prepared his listeners—and us—for the arrival of Jesus. John's coming



as a messenger from the wilderness had been foretold in Isaiah 40:3, which is quoted in Matthew 3:3. His clothing and food, as described in Matthew 3:4, immediately call to mind the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). According to Malachi 4:5-6, Elijah was to return "before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes." Furthermore, Jesus confirmed that John is to be understood as Elijah (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-13).

John affirmed his role. He called people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). Notice that in the next chapter (4:17) Jesus used exactly the same words as he began his public ministry in Galilee. Repentance is part of the preparation one needs to make in order to be ready for this new kingdom that is now at hand. Those who chose to confess their sins participated in water baptism as a sign of purity. John's baptism was not, however, the same as Jesus' baptism with Spirit and fire (3:11).

When John called to task the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he spoke about bearing "fruit worthy of repentance" (verse 8). Fruitful actions are essential for those who anticipate entering the Kingdom that is at hand. These actions will have consequences when the one who holds the "winnowing fork" (verse 12) begins to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Although the church has always connected the one who John proclaimed was coming after him with Jesus, notice that John's announcement did not call Jesus by name. Instead, he described what this one would do. Also, John made no pretense to being the equal of the one "more powerful" (verse 11). Rather, John confessed

his unworthiness even to carry his sandals, a menial job to be sure.

In sum, John's main activity was to announce the Kingdom's nearness and help us get ready. His words and actions prompt us to measure our own preparedness in this season of Advent.

## LEARNING MENU

### *To prepare to welcome Christ.*

#### **A** Light the Advent wreath

Materials: Advent wreath, matches

Light the Advent wreath that you created (or set up) last week. Use the litany for the second week of Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

Invite group members to name ways that they have prepared to welcome Christ this week.

Conclude by praying the prayer for the second week of Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

#### **B** Pray for the presence of Christ

Encourage group members to sit in a relaxed position with eyes closed if that is comfortable for them.

Read Paul's words from Ephesians 3:16-17 and invite group members to meditate on what it would mean if Paul's prayer were answered in their lives: "I pray that, according to the riches of his [God's] glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his

Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

Break the silence by inviting volunteers to state any insights they have gleaned that may be applicable to the group.

### *To appreciate the Jewish roots of Christianity.*

#### **A** Remember Jesus' lineage

Materials: paper and pencils

Ask three volunteers to read Isaiah 11:1-3a, 3b-5, and 6-10. Use information for this passage from the Bible Background as it seems appropriate for the group.

Invite group members to discuss the traits of the one who will "come out from the stump of Jesse" (11:1). Encourage them to characterize the reign that this one will usher in.

Form groups of four. Two of the foursome are to read Matthew 1:1-17, and the other two will focus on Luke 3:23-38. These passages record Jesus' genealogy. Ask each group to list familiar names and take note of how far back the genealogy is traced.

Bring the groups together, and encourage them to report on any findings of interest. (They likely discovered that Matthew spotlighted Jesus' heritage through Abraham and David, beginning in Matthew 1:2 with the patriarch Abraham. They may also note the inclusion of Rahab and Ruth [Matthew 1:5], both non-Israelites. In contrast, Luke trailed Jesus' line back from Joseph all the way to "Adam, son of God" [3:38], thereby giving a more inclusive sweep all the way back to Creation.)

Wrap up by asking the group to discuss: Why do you think it is important to remember Jesus' lineage and family tree? (Be sure group members recognize that Jesus was Jewish and a descendant of David due to the fact that his adoptive father Joseph was part of David's line.)

#### **B** Create a Jesse tree

Materials: small live or artificial tree, construction paper, scissors, markers, colored pencils, wire ornament hangers; optional patterns

## SESSION OUTLINE

### *1. To prepare to welcome Christ.*

### *2. To appreciate the Jewish roots of Christianity.*

### *3. To offer hospitality.*

### *4. To view the Incarnation from John's perspective.*

### *5. To go forth to proclaim the good news.*



# Advent 2007

Scriptures for the Church Seasons

## Leader

HAIL THE HEAVEN BORN

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### 3 Do You See What I See?

#### BIBLE BACKGROUND

##### Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah 35 proclaims that the barren desert will be transformed into lush landscape in preparation for the return of the exiles to their home in Israel. God will come to bring salvation and hope to those who are hopeless. People have no hope for a variety of reasons. Yet, God will heal and change all of these conditions: Weak hands will be strengthened, feeble knees will be made firm, fearful hearts will be made strong, blind eyes will see, deaf ears will hear, the lame will leap, and the mute will sing. Even nature will be dramatically changed when the God of salvation appears.

Verses 8-10 illustrate a new exodus. Recall that during the Exodus from Egypt the people endured life in the wilderness for 40 years and suffered through periods of thirst (Exodus 15:22-27; Numbers 20:2-13). As they returned home, however, they encountered pools and springs of water—oases in a once arid land. They did not need to fear the wild animals that haunted the desert. They would walk safely along “the Holy Way” (Isaiah 35:8), a road set aside for God’s people. They would walk this road in a jubilant procession, singing joyously. The “sorrow and sighing” (verse 10) of suffering would no longer crush them.

Note the use of the words *redeemed* (verse 9) and *ransomed* (verse 10). These words have been appropriated by Christians and ring with loud overtones of Christ’s saving action

on our behalf. We generally read these words in spiritual terms. For Isaiah’s original readers, however, *redeem* would call to mind the buying back of an enslaved family member or getting property or an individual out of debt. Early Jewish readers

also would have associated *redeem* with God’s liberation of the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt. Similarly, *ransom* refers to buying back an individual or an animal. Through God’s intervention, the people walking the Holy Way have been freed—redeemed, ransomed—from their captivity and are able to return to their homeland in Zion.

These amazing reversals of nature and human experience are all the work of God. Isaiah helps us recognize that in God there is hope, no matter how bleak current circumstances appear to be. This hopefulness is a central image for Advent.

##### James 5:7-10

James, whose letter is filled with practical advice on living the Christian life, calls upon believers to “be patient” (5:7), meaning here, “long-suffering.” This patience takes a long-term view, for James is talking about patience that must last until Christ’s

return. This coming, according to James, is near, so near, in fact, that Christ the judge is “standing at the doors” (verse 9). The patience to which James refers is to be that of the farmer. He is anxious for his crops to bear fruit but knows this maturation requires time and cannot be rushed. The rains must come, but he cannot make that happen.

Note the word *therefore* in verse 7. In verses 1-6, James warns rich people who have gotten their wealth by oppressing others. In verse 7, James addresses Christians. They were likely to have been oppressed by the rich. In contrast to the rich who will be weeping and wailing (verse 1) when the Lord appears, God’s people need to strengthen their intentions, their will, which is the Hebrew understanding of the word *heart*.

Living under an oppressive rule, it would be easy for the fledgling Christian community to turn on itself, to “grumble against one another” (verse 9). *Grumbling* would have called to the minds of James’s earliest readers the behavior of the Israelites in the wilderness. James urged them to look to the prophets as models of endurance in the face of suffering. Like the patient farmers, the prophets knew how to wait until the time was fulfilled.

Just as the prophets had confidence to trust that God would make good on promises, so James urged the believers to trust that Christ will indeed return. As Christians, we are called to view our lives through the lens of this impending return. With assurance and the patience of

Scriptures for  
Advent:  
The Third Sunday  
Isaiah 35:1-10  
James 5:7-10  
Matthew 11:2-11



a farmer awaiting the time of harvest that he knows will come, we await our Lord's coming again.

### **Matthew 11:2-11**

Last week we encountered John the Baptizer in the wilderness preaching repentance. This week we learn that John is in prison. Having heard what Jesus was doing, John sent his disciples to check on Jesus' identity. John wanted to know, "Is Jesus really the long-awaited Messiah?" That question may strike us as odd. Although John did not identify Jesus by name in his proclamation in Matthew 3:1-12, he clearly described the one we Christians call Jesus as the Messiah.

In answer to their question, Jesus pointed out to John's messengers the works of mercy and justice that he had performed (11:5). These were not hidden works but rather ones that the messengers could witness for themselves. Perhaps the problem was that the works Jesus performed did not square with the works of the one John was expecting. John's images depict a wrathful one (3:7), baptizing with fire (3:11), harvesting with a winnowing fork so as to separate wheat from chaff (3:12), and poised to cut down unfruitful trees (3:10). Messianic expectations in John's day focused on a powerful king, such as David, who would take necessary steps to overthrow Israel's oppressors. In contrast, Jesus was healing the sick and reaching out to the poor and oppressed on the margins of society—the same kinds of actions Isaiah foretold in Chapter 35. So, from John's point of view, his question was not as outlandish as it may sound to us.

After the messengers departed, Jesus spoke of John in glowing terms. Jesus affirmed that John was the messenger sent before him just as Malachi had prophesied (Malachi 3:1; 4:5). This description points to John as Elijah, who had come to prepare people for the reign of God. John is an important figure in our Advent journey as we, too, prepare for the reign of God as it comes to us in Christ Jesus.

### **LEARNING MENU**

*To prepare to see God in Jesus.*

#### **A Light the Advent wreath**

Materials: Advent wreath, matches

Light the Advent wreath that group members created during the first session. Use the litany for the third week found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

Read these questions slowly, giving group members time to mull over answers in their minds.

What do you expect at Christmas? What or who are you seeking?

Do you find what you are searching for? If not, why does your quest seem to be so elusive?

Conclude this quiet time by praying aloud the prayer for the third week in Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

#### **B Recall those who waited**

Materials: symbols for the Jesse tree

Invite seven group members to add symbols to the Jesse tree that the group began to create last week. Use symbols for December 10-16. As they add these

symbols, encourage them to comment on the people related to each symbol and how these people acted as they waited for the coming of the Lord.

Ask: How can these people be role models for us?

Pray aloud the prayer for the third week in Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

*To experience the joy of homecoming.*

#### **A Imagine a homecoming**

Materials: newsprint and marker

Encourage group members to talk in small groups about their own experiences with homecomings. Post the following questions on newsprint for each group to discuss.

How would you describe the perfect homecoming?

As you recall a particular homecoming, perhaps one associated with a holiday, what expectations did you have? How were those expectations fulfilled? In what ways were you disappointed?

Select a volunteer to read Isaiah 35:1-10. Suggest that as this person reads, the other group members imagine what it must have been like to look ahead to this return home. Invite them to comment on any thoughts they have concerning this return from exile. Use information from Bible Background for this passage to enhance group members' understanding of this story of homecoming.

Refer group members to the fourth paragraph of "Home for the Holidays" in the student book. Discuss: What might it mean to say that God is the beginning, middle, and end of our life's journey?

#### **B Discuss memories of going home**

Materials: recording of "I'll Be Home for Christmas" or "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays" and appropriate player, dish of sand (dirt) and bowl of water and flowers, optional construction paper and markers

## **SESSION OUTLINE**

*1. To prepare to see  
God in Jesus.*

*2. To experience the  
joy of homecoming.*

*3. To explore the trait  
of patience.*

*4. To examine Jesus'  
life and actions.*

*5. To continue to  
await God's coming.*



# Advent 2007

Scriptures for the Church Seasons

## Leader

HAIL THE HEAVEN BORN

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# 4 The Depths of Deity

### BIBLE BACKGROUND

#### Isaiah 7:10-16

This familiar passage moves us to the heart of Advent: the coming birth of the Child named Immanuel. Historically, Christians have linked this text with Jesus.

Note that in verse 14 the prophet speaks of “the young woman,” which is the English rendering of the Hebrew word *almah*. That word refers to a marriageable young woman who has reached puberty. In the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint, the word is translated as “virgin,” which is why Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah as “look, the virgin shall conceive.”

For Isaiah’s first readers, the context of these verses is the Judean King Ahaz’s unwillingness to join a political alliance formed by Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) to ward off incursions by Assyria (Isaiah 7:1-9). According to 2 Kings 16:5-9 and 2 Chronicles 28:5-21, Judah was under attack in around 735 B.C. by the kings of Israel and Syria in an attempt to force Judah to participate in the alliance against Assyria. Although the Lord through Isaiah urged Ahaz to seek a sign, he would not do so. Despite his pious refusal, Isaiah realized that Ahaz did, in fact, want to align Judah with Syria and Israel’s enemies and was not

willing to hear a negative word from the Lord concerning his plan.

Isaiah gave a sign anyway: A young woman was pregnant with a son named Immanuel. Some commen-

tators believe this woman was Isaiah’s wife, who is referred to in Isaiah 8:3 with the honorary title of “prophetess.” The woman could also be King Ahaz’s wife, for in the Canaanite language the word for *almah* refers to a queen.

The point of Isaiah 7:15 is that before the child reached the age of moral responsibility, the threat from the Syro-Ephraimite coalition would no longer exist. The prophet’s concern was that Judah’s ruler should have relied on God, not on fragile political alliances.

We need to remember that from the perspective of the Judeans, an enemy siege posed not only political problems but also a theological threat. The promise of 2 Samuel 7 that David’s descendants would rule on his throne forever was jeopardized if a foreign power could topple the reigning Davidic descendant, Ahaz.

#### Romans 1:1-7

As Paul greeted the church in Rome, which he neither founded nor had ever visited, he announced who he was—servant, apostle, and one set apart for particular ministry. In these verses, Paul gives a summary of the gospel he is called to proclaim.

This gospel, made known through the prophets and recorded in the Scriptures, was promised by God. God’s promise was fulfilled in the Son, who was descended from David. This theme of incarnation, of Jesus “descended from David according to the flesh” (1:3), ties in with the Gospel lection from Matthew. The Resurrection makes clear that Jesus is God’s chosen holy one. Furthermore, it demonstrates the mighty power of God. Jesus came in the flesh because God graciously chose to take the initiative.

Those who belong to Jesus live in obedience to him. They recognize that he is the Lord of the church. Salvation reveals itself in the lives of believers who submit themselves to God. Whereas we generally think of “saints” (verse 7) as spiritual superstars, Paul’s first readers would have understood that word to mean that they were “set apart for the gospel of God” (verse 1).

#### Matthew 1:18-25

Mary and Joseph were “engaged” (1:18), though that status was far more binding than our modern understanding of engagement. Although the bride and groom were not yet living together, there was a solemn agreement that they were pledged to one another. To break the engagement required an act akin to divorce. Infidelity was tantamount to adultery.

One can only imagine Joseph’s shock in learning that his bride-to-be had apparently been unfaithful.

*Scriptures for  
Advent:  
The Fourth Sunday  
Isaiah 7:10-16  
Romans 1:1-7  
Matthew 1:18-25*



Matthew tells us that Joseph was "righteous" (verse 19), so we may assume that he was a just man who wanted to do the right thing. According to Deuteronomy 22:23-27, Mary could have been executed for her infidelity, though by the first century A.D., capital punishment was not the norm. Nevertheless, she could have been severely punished and humiliated. Yet, Joseph just wanted "to dismiss her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). Likely he was planning to call two witnesses so he could divorce her without making a public spectacle of her. This was his plan—and a fair and honorable plan it was.

However, it was not God's plan. In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth and early childhood, we find dreams that provide important guidance for people (1:20; 2:12-13, 19, 22). In most of these dreams, an angel—a messenger of God—was present to give God's direction. Since angels can be disconcerting to mortals, their appearance is often accompanied by a command not to fear.

In the case of the angel who appeared to Joseph, the word was that the Child was "from the Holy Spirit" (1:20). The angel gave Joseph the task of naming the child Jesus. Jesus (or *Yeshua* or *Joshua*), which means "Yahweh saves," connected the baby to the Old Testament figure of Joshua, who was the successor of Moses. Matthew went to great lengths to depict Jesus as the one who fulfills Moses' role and indicated Jesus is the one who "will save his people from their sins" (verse 21). Matthew did not envision one who would save the Israelites from political oppressors but rather would save them from that which had caused them to be separated from God.

Just as we saw the importance of obedience in the passage from Romans, here we see that Joseph set aside his own plans to obey God. His obedience enabled the series of events to unfold that ultimately leads to our salvation. As we celebrate Jesus' incarnation in this season of Advent, we need to give thanks for Joseph's spiritual discernment and obedience. We, too, need to be alert for God's voice in our lives.

## LEARNING MENU

*To get ready for the coming Messiah.*

**A** Pass the peace

Materials: candles, matches

Give each person a candle. If your congregation uses short candles with holders for Christmas Eve candle-light services, perhaps you can borrow a few of those. If possible, have group members stand in a circle.

Note that Jesus comes to us as the Prince of Peace.

Light a candle and state in a sentence or two one situation in which you pray that peace prevails. This might relate to a specific war or an area of unrest; or you might want to ask for peace for a group of people such as the poor, abused, oppressed, or homeless.

Hold your lit candle straight up so the person on your right can tilt his or her candle to light it. This person should also lift up a situation in need of peace. Continue around the circle until all the candles are lit.

Conclude by singing or saying "Let There Be Peace on Earth."

Ask group members to extinguish their candles. Collect the candles, and place them in a safe place until you can store them after the session.

**B** Light the Advent candles

Materials: Advent wreath, matches

Light the Advent wreath that group members created during the first session. Use the litany for the fourth week found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

Invite volunteers to affix the remaining symbols to the Jesse tree.

Ask group members to select a few symbols and comment on how they help them connect the events of the Old Testament with the coming of the Messiah.

Pray aloud the prayer for the fourth week in Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide"

*To explore the hope of the Child of promise.*

**A** Do a dramatic reading of Isaiah 7:10-16

Use Bible Background and the fourth, fifth, and sixth paragraphs of "Babies and Politics" in the student book to set the stage for today's reading.

Choose two volunteers to read Isaiah 7:10-16 as a drama. One will read the words of Ahaz and the other the words of Isaiah. Read verse 10 yourself.

Note that the political threat that Ahaz wanted to tackle on his own would be a distant memory by the time the Child, who would be born as a sign from God, was of an age to make moral choices (verse 16).

Discuss: Think of a time when you, like King Ahaz, have been caught between a rock and a hard place. You need not reveal the situation to the group. What criteria did you use to determine the best course of action to take? How did you experience God's leading in this situation?

This child of promise was intended to steer Ahaz away from military action, to encourage him to wait

## SESSION OUTLINE

*1. To get ready for the coming Messiah.*

*2. To explore the hope of the Child of promise.*

*3. To relate Jesus' birth to his crucifixion and resurrection.*

*4. To appreciate Joseph as an example of faith and obedience.*

*5. To worship the coming Messiah.*



# Advent 2007

Scriptures for the Church Seasons

## Leader

HAIL THE HEAVEN BORN

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### 5

## God and Sinners Reconciled

### BIBLE BACKGROUND

#### Isaiah 9:2-7

This passage concerning the rule of a righteous king is familiar to Christians because we read it as a fulfillment of God's promise. A son has been given to us, and he comes bringing light.

Isaiah's first readers would have heard it in a different context. Some interpreters suggest that this oracle may have been part of a royal celebration of a king's coronation, possibly that of Hezekiah, who reigned from 715-687 B.C. As this new monarch took office, the people were excited about the possibility of a Davidic ruler who could reunite parts of Israel that had been conquered by the Assyrians—Zebulun, Naphtali, the region south of Mount Carmel, and the area east of the Galilee—with the southern kingdom of Judah. Others suggest that this passage may be related to the text in the last session from Isaiah 7:10-16. If that is the case, the text in Isaiah 9 celebrates the birth of the child whose coming was promised in 7:14.<sup>1</sup>

The text for the first Sunday in Advent, Isaiah 2:1-5, was a vision of God's future reign of peace. In 2:5, people were called to "walk in the light of the LORD." Today's reading for Christmas Eve recalls that although people had previously "walked in darkness" (9:2) they now experience light shining on

them. What was once a vision has become a reality.

With the coming of God's light, oppression ends and war ceases. Isaiah announced the birth of a son who would reign on David's throne (9:6-7). According to Psalm 2:7 and 89:26, the king is perceived as a son of God. The titles listed in Isaiah 9:6 are similar to those bestowed on Egyptian pharaohs, and they suggest that this is no ordinary birth.<sup>2</sup>

This passage exudes hope, for the Child will establish a peaceable kingdom where justice and righteousness will reign forever. This is the good news of Christmas Eve.

#### Titus 2:11-14

This letter to Titus, traditionally ascribed to Paul, embraces themes we have heard throughout Advent: waiting, salvation, God's appearing, and the hope of Christ's glorious return. In today's passage, we learn that salvation, which comes by God's grace, liberates us from ungodly behavior. As we grow in Christ, we reject that which is godless and worldly and become people who can control ourselves, act in moderation, and live as God's holy people. Salvation does not require us to live in certain ways; it frees us to do so.

God is the one "bringing salvation" (2:11). God is not appearing to a lone figure such as Moses or Jacob but rather becomes manifest in Jesus

so that all may see and participate in salvation. Verses 11-12 focus on the present and help us understand what it means to be saved. Verse 13, however, points us to the future. Salvation has come "to all" (verse 11), but the "manifestation" or appearance of Christ's glory is yet to come. So we wait. During Advent we have looked to the past and remembered how the Israelites waited for God's Messiah. We have also peered ahead to our Savior Christ's second coming. In this passage from Titus, both of those Advent themes converge.

Verse 14 summarizes the life and mission of Jesus, who "gave himself for us." The purpose of this self-sacrifice was twofold: redemption and purification. *Redeem* means to pay the cost of release for a prisoner or captive. Christ the Savior comes to pay the cost of our sins. Furthermore, he will cleanse us just as God had promised in Ezekiel 37:23. A further upshot of Christ's saving work is that he will have "a people of his own." This idea is familiar, for in Exodus 19:5 and Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2, we read about God's possession of a people, set apart and holy. These people exhibit their relationship to God by the way they live and the "good deeds" (Titus 2:14) they do.

#### Luke 2:1-20

Luke's beloved account of Jesus' birth culminates our study. The "God-with-us" that Matthew anticipated (Matthew 1:23) was clearly a real human being born in the midst

Scriptures for  
Christmas:  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20



of a highly charged political situation in Palestine. As Luke told the story, the powerful emperor, Augustus, had ordered a census that required each family to return to the home of the household head. Presumably, these census figures would be used for collecting more taxes for the Roman government.

Luke declared that Jesus was a descendant of David, born in David's hometown of Bethlehem. We know from earlier in the story (Luke 1:26-38) that Mary was pregnant with a special child—one whom Gabriel announced would be "the Son of the Most High" (verse 32) who would reign on David's throne. Yet, this one who was expected to be a king was born among stabled animals. His "purple robe" was only cloths tenderly wrapped around his tiny body by a loving mother. Could this infant possibly be the long-expected Messiah who, according to the people's expectation, would rise up and lead them successfully against their Roman oppressors?

Luke's story emphasizes the lowliness of Jesus' birth. He was welcomed not by kings but by shepherds who, while going about their ordinary business of tending sheep, heard the proclamation of his birth by angels. Stunned and afraid of the angels, the shepherds were called to action: Go and find this newborn Messiah. Wasting no time, the shepherds must have left their flocks and headed toward Bethlehem. They found the Holy Family and reported what the angels had told them. The shepherds responded to their encounter with the Savior by praising God and telling others what they had witnessed.

On this Christmas Eve, will we laud and honor Jesus, affirming

that he is God incarnate and proclaiming that good news to others? Will we continue to wait expectantly for his return, living as holy people until the time God appoints for the Second Coming? We as individual believers and as the body of Christ must decide how we will answer these questions, remembering that our answers have eternal significance.

## LEARNING MENU

### *To prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth.*

#### **A** Light the Advent wreath

Materials: Advent wreath, matches

Light the Advent wreath created during the first session. Remember to light the white Christ candle. Use the litany for Christmas Eve found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

Invite group members to discuss how this study and other spiritual preparations they have made during Advent have enabled them to be ready to celebrate Jesus' birth. If the group is large, ask group members to talk in groups of two or three.

Pray the prayer for Christmas Eve found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

#### **B** Recall the birth scene

Materials: crèche with moveable figures, table, greenery, and hymnals

Invite group members to help you set up a crèche. Provide an appropriately sized table. Place a stable

on the table. Add figures of Mary, Joseph, Jesus in the manger, animals, and the shepherds and their sheep. As group members place the items in the stable, invite them to

talk about what they know about each person, especially new insights they have gained as a result of this study.

Add greenery when the figures are in place. (Note that the magi do not arrive until Epiphany, January 6, so you do not want to place them in the scene today.)

Invite all to gather around the crèche and sing "What Child Is This."

### *To anticipate the one born to sit on David's throne.*

#### **A** Do a reading of Isaiah 9:2-7

Materials: Bibles, newsprint, and a marker

Invite the group to read responsively Isaiah 9:2-7. Assign half to the even numbered verses and the other half to the odd numbered ones. If everyone does not use the same translation of the Bible, select the one that most people have; and ask group members to share so everyone can read.

Ask: What did you think or feel as you read Isaiah 9:2-7? (There is no right or wrong answer here, but group members are likely to express eager anticipation as they await this righteous one who is to come.)

Encourage group members to call out images they find in this passage. List those on newsprint.

Discuss the following questions. As appropriate, use information from Bible Background to expand the discussion.

What negative situations will disappear when the righteous King comes? Based on this prophecy, what traits would you expect the righteous King to exhibit? How would you expect the world to change once his reign begins?

How do you see Jesus fulfilling this prophecy?

#### **B** Listen to Handel's *Messiah*

Materials: tape or CD of "For Unto Us a Child Is Born" from Handel's *Messiah* and appropriate player

Choose a volunteer to read Isaiah 9:2-7. See if these words are familiar

## SESSION OUTLINE

### *1. To prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth.*

### *2. To anticipate the one born to sit on David's throne.*

### *3. To adorn our lives with God's holiness.*

### *4. To proclaim that Jesus the Christ is born.*

### *5. To adore the newborn King.*



to anyone from other sources. Likely, someone will mention Handel's *Messiah*. Play "For Unto Us a Child Is Born." Discuss ways in which this musical version enhances (or detracts from) the intent of Isaiah's prophecy. Further explore Isaiah's prophecy by using Bible Background.

List on newsprint answers to this question: How will life be different once the righteous King comes?

Read these words from the student book (Session 5): "Handel got it right. It is in Jesus that Isaiah's words find their ultimate fulfillment. This Christmas, God invites us to journey again out of our darkness into God's marvelous light. . . . Whatever road you have been traveling, no matter how dark or hopeless, it is not the last word on the matter: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined' (Isaiah 9:2)."

Provide a few moments for quiet reflection so group members may identify their own dark and hopeless roads and envision these ways bathed in the light of God's love and grace.

### *To adorn our lives with God's holiness.*

#### **A** Discuss the Incarnation

Materials: hymnals

Call on a volunteer to read aloud Titus 2:11-14. Note that while Titus may seem to be an unlikely place to search for Scripture on Christmas Eve, in this brief passage we find many connections to Advent and Christmas. Encourage group members to state any relationships they see. Use Bible Background to add to these connections.

Invite group members to read the portion in the student book of the Nicene Creed that teaches us about Jesus' incarnation.

As a group, sing or read the following stanza of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." See what parallels group members can draw between this familiar carol and the Nicene Creed.

"True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal, / lo, he shuns

not the Virgin's womb; / Son of the Father, begotten, not created."

Suggest that group members read silently the paragraph that begins "Jesus became human" in the student book. Note especially the final sentence of that paragraph, and then ask the following questions. You may wish to list responses on newsprint.

In what ways is our church helping people adorn the gospel with holy lives? What other concrete actions can our congregation take to help people adorn the gospel with holy lives? What is it about our church that draws people in so they can check us out?

#### **B** Create Christmas ornaments

Materials: craft paper, markers, optional construction paper, scissors, glue, glitter, cookie cutters

Encourage group members to talk with a few others about a Christmas Eve service that was especially meaningful for them. Suggest that they describe the way the church was decorated, recall significant people in their lives who were present, describe rituals (such as candle lighting or a children's procession of the Holy Family), and name carols they particularly enjoyed singing on that special night.

Bring the group back together, and ask: As you talked with your group, did you notice any common themes? If so, what were they?

Ask a volunteer to read Titus 2:11-14. Use Bible Background, along with group members' ideas, to discuss how these verses relate to Christmas Eve and Advent.

Ask someone to read aloud the sixth paragraph under "Decorating Christmas Teaching" in the student book. Talk about how Christ's people are indeed living ornaments.

Post a large sheet of craft paper on a wall or bulletin board, or place it on a table. If there is someone artistic in the group, ask that person to create the outline of a tree with a green marker. Use one of the following options:

*Option 1:* Distribute markers, and ask each person to draw a ball or another Christmas ornament shape on the craft paper. They may choose to trace the shapes from cookie cutters. Encourage group members to decorate the ornaments if they choose. Ask them to write their names in the ornaments as a reminder that they are "living 'ornaments' that beautifully adorn the tree of God's doctrine."

*Option 2:* If space around the craft paper is limited, distribute construction paper. Ask each group member to cut out a ball or another Christmas tree ornament or trace around a cookie cutter and then cut out the shape. Encourage group members to decorate the ornaments as they choose and write their names in the ornament as a reminder that they are "living 'ornaments' that beautifully adorn the tree of God's doctrine." Provide glue so group members can affix their ornaments to the craft paper.

Invite group members to talk about how believers can live so as to be the kind of ornaments that God wants us to be. Titus 2:11-13 will provide clues.

### *To proclaim that Jesus the Christ is born.*

#### **A** Read and discuss Luke's Christmas story

Materials: newsprint and marker

Choose three readers for Luke 2:1-20: one for verses 1-7, a second for verses 8-14, and a third for verses 15-20. Read the Scriptures aloud.

Discuss the following questions:

What is the significance of God's Son being born into the real world with real people that have real problems?

How is peace an antidote to fear?

In what ways can you, individually and as a church, join the shepherds in heralding Jesus' coming? (List ideas on newsprint.)

Take the list you have created and challenge group members to turn the ideas into concrete suggestions for spreading the message



of peace, hope, and good news to a world that so desperately needs to hear that word. These suggestions may include actions that call for hope and create peace.

Read slowly the last paragraph of Bible Background for the passage on Luke 2:1-20. Ask group members to ponder each of these questions.

Wrap up by inviting volunteers to state new insights they have gleaned from this passage.

## **B** Create news reports

Materials: paper and pencils, newsprint and marker

Choose someone to read the narration and someone to read the angel's words in Luke 2:1-20. Invite the group to join together as the heavenly host to read verse 14.

Form groups of six. Distribute paper and pencils so that each person can take notes. Ask each group to select someone in the group to speak as Mary, someone to speak as Joseph, another person to be the angel, and a fourth to speak as a shepherd. The other two group members are to act as reporters for the *Bethlehem Gazette* and ask the following questions:

*Questions for Mary:* What were your concerns as you and Joseph left Nazareth to head toward Bethlehem? What did you think the first time you saw your son?

*Questions for Joseph:* What were your concerns as you left Nazareth? How did you feel about Jesus when you first saw him, even though you knew he was not your own child? What were your hopes and dreams for him, given that through your adoption he was part of the house of David?

*Questions for the angel:* What was your response when God told you to proclaim good news? What were your expectations concerning this Savior?

*Questions for the shepherd:* How did you react to the angel and its message? From your perspective, what would constitute the peace the heavenly host sang about? What one lasting impression do you have

of the Holy Family? What did you tell others about this experience? How did they respond?

Encourage each person (or a team of two) to write a newspaper account of Jesus' birth based on the answers they have heard. Then bring the group together and invite volunteers to read their news articles.

Conclude by challenging group members to tell the good news to others.

## *To adore the newborn king.*

### **A** Envision a world reconciled by Jesus

Materials: paper and pencils

Recall from the introduction to today's session in the student book that Christmas Day has cosmic significance because we are reminded that God broke into the world in order to bring about reconciliation. Through sin and disobedience we have separated ourselves from God and from one another. In Christ, however, the barriers that divide have been broken down.

Help group members imagine a reconciled world where peace, justice, and hope rather than strife, injustice, and despair reign by discussing the following questions:

Think about the countries torn by war and hatred. How could the daily lives of citizens be different if they took seriously the reconciliation that Christ offers?

Think about families rocked by disharmony and abuse. What changes could shape their daily lives if they accepted the reconciliation Christ offers?

Think about individuals who seem adrift, hopeless, and depressed. What transformations could occur in their lives if they took seriously the reconciliation that Christ offers?

Think about churches where people of faith have refused fellowship with one another because of differing understandings of the Bible and beliefs. How could reconciliation through Christ affect not only

the individual members but also the witness of the church?

Distribute paper and pencils. Encourage each group member to write at least one action that he or she will take to live into this vision of a reconciled world.

### **B** Offer praise for the one who reconciles

Materials: hymnals, paper, and pencils

Distribute hymnals, paper, and pencils. Form groups of three or four. Suggest that group members turn to the sections of the hymnals appropriate for Advent and Christmas. Post the following questions on newsprint, and then ask group members to look in the hymns for information. (Note that not all questions apply to every hymn the group may choose to examine.)

What connections do you see between the Old and New Testaments in this hymn?

How are angels depicted? How are Mary and Joseph characterized? What do you learn about the shepherds? How is Jesus described?

How do you expect the world to be different now that Jesus has appeared?

Bring the group together. Call on a volunteer from each group to report his or her findings.

Ask: If you had these hymns but not the Bible itself, do you believe that you would have an accurate picture of the newborn King and the people and events that foretold his coming and surrounded him at his birth? Give examples to support your answer.

Invite group members to select several hymns to sing to wrap up today's session and the course.

Dismiss the group with the song "Go Now in Peace."

<sup>1</sup>From *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI (Abingdon Press); page 121.

<sup>2</sup>From *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI; page 123.



with assurance that all would be well. He chose instead to seek military assistance from the Assyrians. Why do we generally find it easier to seek a "might makes right" solution to problems rather than "let go and let God"?

What examples of divine intervention can you recall from the Bible or your own life that turned a seemingly impossible situation into a hopeful experience?

End the discussion with a few quiet moments for group members to reflect on the following questions: When have I chosen to do things my way rather than turn the problem over to God? What was the outcome? What did I learn?

### **B** Create symbols of hope

Materials: construction paper, scissors, markers or pencils, Bible commentary (optional)

Choose a volunteer to read Isaiah 7:10-16. Provide Bible Background and information from "Babies and Politics" in the student book to help group members understand the political climate.

As an option, select a few volunteers who will use one or more Bible commentaries to research the political situation that confronted King Ahaz. Distribute reference book(s), paper, and pencils for them to use. Allow time for the researchers to gather their information. There will be a point in the next activity for them to report their findings.

Read this story of hope that may be familiar to some group members.

A child walked up and down a beach, stopping occasionally to pick up an object and throw it back into the ocean. After witnessing the child's repeated action for at least ten minutes, a curious observer could no longer contain himself and asked the child what he was doing.

"I'm throwing these starfish back into the water before they die."

"What's the point?" the observer asked, as he saw hun-

dreds of starfish washed up on the sand. "There are so many starfish here from the storm that you can't possibly make any difference."

The child threw another stranded starfish to safety. "I will for this one." The child continued to walk along, rescuing one starfish after another, as the observer turned and strolled away.<sup>1</sup>

Ask: In what ways do you see the child's action on behalf of the starfish as being similar to God's action on behalf of Judah and King Ahaz? (Note that in both situations there is unexpected intervention that offers possibilities for life and hope.)

Distribute construction paper, scissors, and markers or pencils. Ask group members to cut the construction paper into a shape that reminds them of hope. A circle, for example, symbolizes wholeness and never-ending life. A triangle, with its three sides, brings to mind the Trinity. The cross speaks for itself. The starfish of the story we just read might also be a useful symbol.

Encourage group members to write Isaiah 7:14 on their symbols of hope. Suggest that they place the symbols in their Bibles so they can call to mind God's promise of hope in times when they feel they are between a rock and a hard place, with enemies or difficult circumstances on all sides of them.

Call on group members who were researching the political intrigue at the time of King Ahaz to give their report, if you chose to do this option.

### *To relate Jesus' birth to his crucifixion and resurrection.*

#### **A** Compare the birth and resurrection of Jesus

Read aloud Romans 1:1-2. Then invite group members to join you in reading Romans 1:3-6 as it appears in creedal form in the student book.

Ask the following questions. Use information from Bible Background and the student book that may be useful in augmenting group members' responses.

What does this passage tell you about Paul? What does it tell you about Jesus? What does this passage tell you about who you are?

What connections do you see between the birth and the resurrection of Jesus? How is Jesus' birth and resurrection good news for the world?

What can you do to bear witness to this good news?

Ask two volunteers to read the imaginary dialogue between Paul and the worship leader found in the student book.

Encourage group members to respond to Paul's statement "Christmas means nothing without Easter" by agreeing or disagreeing and stating why they hold their position.

#### **B** Roleplay church members in Rome

Materials: paper and pencils

Select a volunteer to read Romans 1:1-7 as if he or she is reading Paul's letter to the church at Rome, as would have been done.

Invite group members to imagine themselves as this first-century Roman congregation, and ask: How do you perceive Christmas and Easter to be tied together?

Encourage group members to roleplay the following scenario in small groups, or select a group of volunteers to act out the scenario for the rest of the group. At least one of the actors in each group is to be a member of the church in Rome who has heard and discussed Paul's words. Another actor is to have little or no knowledge of Jesus. As these actors play their parts, the one (or more) who can make the connections between Christmas and Easter is to tell the other one (or more) about Jesus and why the Resurrection of Easter is so important in relation to the incarnation (God coming in the flesh) at Christmas.

Conclude this activity by singing or reading "Lord of the Dance." Invite group members to comment on how this hymn links Jesus' birth and resurrection. (Note that the pre-existent Christ who "came down from heaven" is the same one who



was born in Bethlehem, ministered to people who decided whether or not to accept him, was crucified and buried, and then rose to eternal life. Without the resurrection, Jesus' birth would not have been a particularly memorable event.)

**To appreciate Joseph as an example of faith and obedience.**

**A** Discuss biblical accounts of Joseph

Select two volunteers—one to read the part of the narrator and one to read the words of the angel as found in Matthew 1:18-25. Use Bible Background if necessary.

Help group members learn about Joseph by assigning volunteers to check the following passages and report their findings.

- Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3 (worked as a carpenter)
- Matthew 2:13-15; 2:19-23 (visited by an angel; also note 1:20-24)
- Luke 2:41-52 (hunted for the 12-year-old Jesus, who was eventually found in the Temple)

Invite group members to talk in small groups about who Joseph was and how his responses to the divine direction he received in dreams affected the course of human history. Add pertinent information from "Honoring God Before Ourselves" in the student book.

Note that despite his importance in the plan of salvation, we actually hear little about Joseph. Discuss the following questions: How does Joseph serve as an exemplar of faith and obedience to God? Why do you suppose Joseph's importance has been minimized? What could be done to enlarge our understanding of his role?

**B** Imagine Joseph's dream

Materials: picture of Joseph encountering the angel, newsprint, and marker

Prior to the session, look online or at your local bookstore for the following pictures or others on the same theme:

- *The Vision of Saint Joseph*, by Philippe de Champaigne (1642-43) National Gallery, London
- *The Dream of Saint Joseph*, by Georges de la Tour (1640) Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes
- *Iesu Nativitas*, by Salvador Dali (1964-67)

Choose two volunteers to read the parts of the narrator and the angel in Matthew 1:18-25. If possible, darken the room while the two are reading to give the feeling of night.

Encourage group members to imagine themselves as Joseph, then discuss the following questions:

When you awoke, what was your initial impression? Did you believe this dream and decide to act immediately; or did you hesitate, needing time to think? What prompted you to say yes?

How did you feel about being responsible for Emmanuel and his mother? What were your biggest fears or concerns about following the angel's directive?

Show the picture(s) that you located. Distribute paper and pencils. Post the following questions on newsprint, and encourage group members to respond in writing:

What mood do the colors and placement of figures and objects set for you? How accurately do you think the artist depicted the events in Matthew 1:18-25?

If the artist has taken liberties with the story, why do you think he (or she) did that? What was the artist trying to say about this story?

How might you have depicted the story differently? Why? What are you trying to emphasize?

End this activity by asking: What new insights have you gained about Joseph?

**To worship the coming Messiah.**

**A** Listen for God's guidance

Materials: hymnals

Invite group members to name ways that Joseph can serve as a role model for them. Be sure to include the idea that he was open to God's

guidance in the form of an angel speaking to him in a dream. His obedience to the angel's guidance allowed God's plan for the coming Messiah to move forward.

Provide quiet time for group members to offer God a dilemma or problem that they face. Some group members may wish to pray; others may search a hymnal for songs that comfort and guide; still others may prefer to search their Bibles for promises.

Break the silence by reading the prayer for the fourth week in Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide." Then, as a group, sing "Emmanuel, Emmanuel."

**B** Explore the depths of relationship with God

Materials: paper and pencils, hymnals, newsprint and marker

Recall from the student book the metaphor connecting God and the ocean. Recall that we like to "play in the theological shallows where we are still in control of our movements."

Ask group members to discuss the following questions in small groups:

What might it take for me to set out further into the unexplored depths of God's grace and love? What risks am I willing to take to swim into these uncharted waters?

Distribute paper and pencils. Invite group members to write a confidential dialogue in which they talk with Jesus about the tensions and fears they experience as they consider exploring a deeper relationship with him.

Then read this prayer: Lord, I want to be like Joseph, who was willing to risk his reputation and future to obey your will. Empower me by your Spirit to take risks for you so that I may explore the depths of your love and grace; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Close the session by singing "Emmanuel, Emmanuel."

<sup>1</sup>This story is based on a story by Loren Eiseley in *The Star Thrower*.



Play the song you have selected. As an alternative, find the lyrics to one of the songs and read them; or invite group members to sing them.

Encourage group members to respond to the song by talking about what it means to them to be "home for the holidays." Some group members may be able to talk about holidays when they were unable to be home and how they felt about being away from family.

Choose a volunteer to read Isaiah 35:1-10. Use the Bible Background to help group members recognize that Isaiah is writing about a homecoming of the redeemed. The exiled Israelites are returning to their homeland in Jerusalem (Zion). Call upon group members' knowledge of the Exodus to compare and contrast that return to the one that Isaiah looks forward to.

Form three teams as follows and assign activities to enable this passage to come alive.

**Team One:** Isaiah 35:1-2, 6b-7. Arrange sand and a bowl of water so as to become an oasis in the desert. Add flowers. (If these props are not available, give the group paper and markers to illustrate the scene.)

**Team Two:** Isaiah 35:3-6a. Pantomime the actions described in these verses.

**Team Three:** Isaiah 35:8-10. Choose one or two reporters who will interview "the ransomed of the LORD" (35:10) to describe how they are feeling about this return home and what their expectations are.

Bring the small groups together and provide time for each group to present their work. Ask: What new insights did you gain from this passage that might relate to what contemporary refugees experience when they are able to return to homes that have been ravaged by war or natural disaster?

### *To explore the trait of patience.*

**A** Discuss facing difficulties with patience

Ask someone to read James 5:7-10. Use the Bible Background for James

if you think it would be helpful.

Tie the passage into this Advent study by noting that James called for patience "until the coming of the Lord." Note that James used the example of a farmer who must wait patiently for his crop to yield its harvest. Ask the group to think of other images that convey a similar notion of patience. Then ask group members to identify biblical people who exhibited patience. List these names on newsprint. (Note that the seventh and eighth paragraphs in "Cultivating Patience" in the student book name several examples that you may want to add.)

Ask: How do you define *patience*? Point out that the patience to which James refers is longsuffering, a perseverance in the face of serious challenges such as oppression. Read these words from the student book: "If patience is a Christian virtue, it is not a wimpy, passive, and silent resignation to life as we know it. It is a radical, vocal, trusting, and active waiting on God even when circumstances around us might try to rattle our resolve and shake our faith."

Discuss: What does this radical patience look like in the life of a Christian? Without identifying people by name, can you give examples of patience in the face of grief, hardship, oppression, illness, natural disaster, or other crisis?

What do you suppose empowers people who are experiencing trouble to stay resolute and patient, even when there are no easy answers?

### **B** Explore the practice of patience

Materials: news articles concerning oppression and hardship, paper, and pencils

Choose a volunteer to read James 5:7-10. Use the Bible Background to enable group members to better understand James's message. Point out that James was calling for patience among those who are facing oppression, particularly poor persons who are economically oppressed by the rich.

Form small groups equal to the

number of news articles you have been able to locate. Distribute paper and pencils. Give each group a news article, and ask them to complete the following steps:

**Step 1:** Read the article to identify who is being oppressed by whom. Perhaps some in the group will be able to provide historical background regarding this oppression. In some cases, such as in the Middle East, wars and religious or ethnic tensions date back centuries.

**Step 2:** Suggest ideas for ways in which the kind of patience promoted by James could make a difference in how people handle the oppression. Think here about what Jesus might do, even though the group that you are investigating may not be Christian. List your ideas.

**Step 3:** Suggest ideas as to how "outsiders" could help to end this oppression. Recognize that diplomacy and negotiation generally require far more patience than a military solution.

**Step 4:** Choose a reporter to relate your ideas to the rest of the group.

### *To examine Jesus' life and actions.*

**A** Explore seeing from a different perspective

Enlist a volunteer to read John's words as recorded in Matthew 3:7-12, which we studied previously. Ask: What do you think John expected of the Messiah? List the group's ideas on newsprint. Use information from "A Different Advent Perspective" in the student book and the Bible Background for Matthew 11:2-11 to help group members see that John's expectations were different from what we in retrospect might assume. However, he was not alone in his apocalyptic expectations, for many Jewish people were awaiting a strong Davidic ruler-warrior who would free them from the oppression of Roman rule.

Choose at least three readers for Matthew 11:2-11: one to read the part of the narrator, one (or more) to read the messengers' question in verse 3, and one to read Jesus' words.



Select five volunteers to find and read aloud Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:7; 61:1. Ask a volunteer to read Jesus' description of his ministry from Luke 4:16-19, which is partially quoted from Isaiah.

Encourage group members to characterize the kind of activities they would expect of the messianic king based on these readings. List these ideas on newsprint. Compare these ideas with those previously listed concerning John's expectations. Note that Jesus is surely fulfilling certain expectations set forth in the Old Testament, even though these are not the expectations that John had in mind.

Ask: What does Jesus have to say about John? Do you sense that he is in any way critical of John for raising the question in verse 3? Why or why not? In what ways does Jesus' response to the messengers expand John's perception?

### **B** Create collages illustrating Jesus' ministry

Materials: posterboard, pictures of people in need, scissors, glue, paper, pencils, markers, and newsprint

Read Matthew 11:2-11. Invite group members to work in groups of two or three to create collages that illustrate Jesus' ministry. These collages may include, but are not limited to, the specific actions that Jesus mentioned in verse 5.

Pair two teams together. Ask them to describe Jesus' ministry by showing their collages to the other team. Invite them to talk about ways that they see Jesus' ministry in action today. Suggest that group members use these collages as springboards to bear witness to how God has worked in their lives and in the lives of others. For example, they may tell stories of healing or of how God's good news changed lives.

Read Jesus' words from Matthew 10:7-8, which are part of his instructions to the Twelve as he sent them out to the mission field: "As you go, proclaim the good

news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment."

Ask: What do Jesus' words suggest concerning your role in his ministry? In what ways might you fulfill this role? (List ideas on newsprint.) Try to flesh out the listed ideas by encouraging group members to talk about ministries in which they participate. While some will point to "in-house" ministries such as singing in the choir or serving on boards, try to find out other things they do in Jesus' name outside of the church.

If the group needs new ideas to consider, suggest the following examples: visiting patients in hospitals or other care facilities, helping rebuild after natural disasters, and reading to those who are visually impaired.

Distribute paper and pencils. Ask group members to list one or more ministries that they will investigate. Challenge them to make a commitment to become involved in at least one ministry they have identified.

### *To continue to await God's coming.*

### **A** Pray together

Recall that Jesus needed to help John broaden his horizons as to who the Messiah was and what he would do. Note that we sometimes need help in recognizing that neither Jesus nor his followers meets our often narrowly prescribed expectations.

Read the following prayer. Invite group members to offer silent prayers as you pause. Suggest that group members remain silent as a musician plays "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" to conclude the session.

Gracious God, as we journey through this Advent season, hear the cries of our hearts while we await your second coming and the celebration of your incarnation. (pause) Equip us, Most Holy One,

to wait with longsuffering for you. We remember especially those situations in our lives and the lives of others that demand patience in the face of struggle. (pause) Empower us with your Holy Spirit that we might heal the sick, raise the dead, and preach good news to the poor just as Jesus did and commissioned his followers to do. (pause) We pray these prayers in the precious name of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

Cue the musician to play "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." Motion silently for group members to leave the learning area.

### **B** Sing a hymn

Materials: paper and pencils, newsprint and marker, meditative music and appropriate player

Prior to the session, write the following questions on newsprint, and post: What are you doing during this Advent season that enables you to prepare for an eventual homecoming with God? What else could you do to seek God?

What strategies do you find useful in cultivating patience? How would you rate your level of patience, your tolerance to living with ambiguity while situations await resolution?

What actions will you take in the coming week to provide the kind of healing, caring ministry that Jesus modeled for us?

Distribute paper and pencils, and ask group members to answer the posted questions. Encourage group members to respond to any of these that they find useful. As an option, play meditative instrumental music in the background as group members write their thoughts.

Next, challenge group members to integrate what they have experienced today into their own lives by journaling. Note that one's journal entries are private and not intended to be shared. Spelling, grammar, and the like are unimportant. What the writers need to focus on is their relationship with God.

Close the session by singing "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates."



for Jesse tree symbols or symbols themselves, index cards

Choose a volunteer to read aloud Isaiah 11:1-10.

Direct group members' attention to the second and third paragraphs of "A Christmas Tree With Roots" in the student book to recall the Jesse tree tradition.

The idea for the Jesse tree comes from Isaiah 11:1, which describes branches growing out of the stump of a tree. In contrast to the Chrismon tree, which uses symbols of Christ, the Jesse tree uses symbols from Old Testament stories to connect God's journey with the people of Israel to God's coming in Jesus.

Invite group members to share their experiences with Jesse trees. Perhaps some of them currently use such a tree.

Distribute one fourth of a sheet of 8.5 by 11-inch construction paper to each person and suggest that group members cut it into a shape and/or use markers or colored pencils to draw a symbol. You will need a total of 24 symbols, one for each day from December 2-25.

To make a Jesse tree, start with the earliest story in Genesis as Day 1 of Advent (December 2, 2007); and proceed from there in chronological order. Here are possible stories and choices of symbols, though you may substitute others. Be sure that each story is assigned to a different person. You may wish to write each story and symbol on an index card for easy distribution.

<b>Creation</b>	dove or globe (Genesis 1:1-2:3)
<b>Fall</b>	serpent or tree with fruit (Genesis 2:4-3:13)
<b>Flood</b>	ark, rainbow, or animals (Genesis 6:11-22; 7:17-8:3; 9:8-17)
<b>Babel</b>	tower (Genesis 11:1-9)
<b>Promise</b>	stars (Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-6)
<b>Sacrifice</b>	ram (Genesis 22:1-19)
<b>Jacob</b>	ladder (Genesis 28:1-17)
<b>Joseph</b>	coat of colors or grain sack (Genesis 37-50)

<b>Moses</b>	burning bush (Exodus 2:1-4:20)
<b>Passover</b>	lamb or blood on doorframe (Exodus 12:1-14:31)
<b>Decalogue</b>	two stone tablets (Exodus 19:16-20:20)
<b>Joshua</b>	ram's horn; crumbled wall (Joshua 1:1-11; 6:1-20)
<b>David</b>	harp or shepherd's crook (1 Samuel 16:1-23-17:58)
<b>Elijah</b>	altar with water and fire (1 Kings 17:1-16; 18:17-46)
<b>Isaiah</b>	tongs with hot coals (Isaiah 6:1-13)
<b>Habakkuk</b>	stone watchtower (Habakkuk 1:1-2:1; 3:16-19)
<b>Messenger</b>	fire (Malachi 3:1-5; 4:1-6)
<b>Zechariah</b>	writing tablet and pencil (Luke 1:57-80)
<b>John</b>	water or shell (Matthew 3:1-6)
<b>Mary</b>	angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-38)
<b>Joseph</b>	tools of a carpenter (Matthew 1:18-25)
<b>Journey</b>	donkey (Luke 2:1-5)
<b>Magi</b>	gift or star (Matthew 2:1-12)
<b>Jesus</b>	manger with Baby (Luke 2:1-20)

Ask group members to attach symbols for December 2-9. Collect the other symbols, and plan to attach them in subsequent weeks as a reminder of Jesus' Jewish roots in the house of David. If you do not have enough group members to do all the symbols today, assign as many days as possible; and ask if some group members would be willing to work at home on other symbols to be added in future weeks.

#### *To offer hospitality.*

**A** Reenacting welcoming one another

Ask a volunteer to read Romans 15:4-13. Use Bible Background information in whatever ways may be helpful to the group. Note especially Paul's command in verse 7 to

welcome one another.

Encourage group members to report times when they felt particularly welcomed or extended a warm welcome to others.

Form two groups. Ask one group to read the parts labeled "Outside" in the student book. Ask the other group to read the parts marked "Inside." Discuss the following questions with the group:

How are those inside the house like or unlike you? In what ways are those outside the house like or unlike you? Would a stranger who came to your church find a warm welcome and caring hospitality? Cite examples to support your answer.

Offering hospitality often requires being inconvenienced and taking a risk. What makes you (individually and as a congregation) willing to do this? Are there situations in which you "draw the line" and refuse to offer hospitality? Explain your answer.

**B** Create a plan to welcome the stranger

Ask a volunteer to read Romans 15:4-13. Use Bible Background information in whatever ways may be helpful to the group.

Identify places where people in need can go for shelter, food, or other critical assistance. List these places on newsprint. Invite group members who are familiar with some of these facilities to tell what they know about them.

Develop a plan of action with group members to do at least one of the following, or suggest ideas appropriate to your community and congregation and develop a plan of action to meet those needs. For example,

- Volunteer to assist at one of the sites you have identified.
- Plan to serve a meal together at a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter.
- Invite people in need to your church for a dinner that you will prepare, serve, and pay for.
- Coordinate with other churches in the area to house homeless people, particularly during cold or hot months. (Some commu-



nities do this on a rotating basis, with each congregation taking a turn for a week to shelter and feed those in need.)

- Purchase clothing and toys for children in need. Names are often available from the local social services agency or a church agency that deals with children awaiting foster care or adoption.

As you think about a plan of action, be sure to include what needs to be done, with whom, how, where, and when. You will likely want to create a task force to explore and finalize details, get any necessary permissions from the church governing board if an event will take place at the church, request or raise funding if needed, and follow up so that the project is completed. When you complete the project, review what you have done and evaluate to see what else you can do and how you might improve the way you do it.

### *To view the incarnation from John's perspective.*

**A** Discuss John's view of the Messiah

Materials: sheets of paper, pens or pencils, newsprint, and markers

Choose two volunteers, one to read the part of the narrator and one to speak John's words in Matthew 3:1-12. Use information from Bible Background to explain why people would have viewed John as the prophet Elijah who had come again.

Lead group members in identifying the images we have of Christmas versus John's images. Write these contrasting ideas on newsprint, using two columns. For additional ideas, direct group members' attention to the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh paragraphs under "John's Christmas Sermon" in the student book.

Read this idea from the student book: "Why is it important to read John's Christmas sermon from the wilderness during Advent? Because John reminds us that the 'Babe lying in a Manger' is also the 'Righteous Judge' who comes to separate wheat from chaff."

Ask: How does John's understanding of the incarnate Christ challenge your assumptions regarding Jesus and Christmas?

Do you agree with John, or would you nuance his argument? If so, how?

If we took John's view seriously, how would our Advent preparations and our celebration of Christmas be different from what we currently do?

If John's view were ever generally espoused in the United States, how would that affect our celebration of Christmas, especially in terms of its current commercial appeal?

**B** Explore the fruit of repentance

Materials: paper and pencils

Choose two volunteers, one to read the part of the narrator and one to speak John's words in Matthew 3:1-12. Invite "John" to come to the front of the learning area to read so that he may actually address the "crowd" of participants.

Use the Bible Background to help group members realize that the crowd would have likely associated John with Elijah, another prophet who was to appear before the coming of the reign of God. Encourage group members to respond to John's message by means of body language and facial expressions.

Discuss: What do you think John meant when he said that we are to "bear fruit worthy of repentance"?

Distribute paper and pencils. Ask group members to turn to Galatians 5:22 and list the fruit of the Spirit on their papers. Wording will vary among different translations; but, according to the NRSV, the list includes love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Form teams of three, and assign one of the words to each team. Ask teams to create skits or write brief stories illustrating one of the words from Galatians 5:22.

Provide time for teams to read their stories or act out their skits.

Wrap up this portion of the session by challenging group members to write their answers to this question on the paper on which they have listed the fruit of the Spirit: What fruit is evident in my life?

*To go forth to proclaim the good news.*

**A** Envision the reign of the one to come

Materials: picture of Edward Hicks's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which can be found online, in books, and often on Christmas cards

Choose a volunteer to read again Isaiah 11:6-9. Hold up or pass around a copy of Edward Hicks's 1848 painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Note that Hicks was a Quaker preacher-artist.

Encourage group members to talk with a partner or in small groups about how this picture depicts Isaiah's harmonious kingdom. Suggest that they consider colors, expressions, and placement of the various animals and characters.

Provide a few moments of silence so that group members may ponder this question: How does this painting reflect the essence of the kingdom that the shoot "from the stump of Jesse" (11:1) will usher in?

Conclude by inviting group members to echo these words as you read them: Go forth to proclaim the good news that God's anointed one will bring forth the righteousness and harmony of the peaceable kingdom.



Invite group members to think visually about their own spiritual journeys. Suggest that they draw a map, starting at point A (whatever that might be for them) and marking important crossroads and streets they have taken. They may label each point with life events such as marriage, retirement, or a serious illness. Encourage them also to label spiritual turning points, such as realizing God's call on their lives, helping someone to come to know Christ, or taking a life-changing missions trip. Maybe there are detours or dead ends that they also need to note.

Form teams of three or four. Suggest that group members consider how their own spiritual journeys may parallel the journey of the pilgrims heading toward Zion.

Post the following questions, which you will want to write on newsprint prior to the session, so that the teams may discuss them:

What resources have empowered you to be "on the road" with God? How does Isaiah's vision inspire you to press ahead in your own journey? What can you do to help people stream toward God?

In what figurative ways are you able to beat swords into plowshares? In other words, what actions are you taking to bring about the kind of peaceful world that God wants for all people?

*To recognize what time it is  
(Romans 13:11-14).*

**A** Discuss Romans 13:11-14

Materials: newsprint and markers

Ask group members to listen for words or phrases that capture their attention as you (or a volunteer) read aloud Romans 13:11-14.

Encourage group members to call out the words they have identified and list them on newsprint. Ask them to try to identify why these particular words or phrases are meaningful to them. Why do they strike a chord? Use information from the Bible Background if needed. Focus on the themes of time and light.

Discuss the following questions with the whole group or in teams of two or three:

Note the example in Session 1 of the student book of people missing the predawn Venus in 2002 and 2003. Why did people miss this rare phenomenon? How does the Venus example relate to Paul's concern that people need to wake up and be aware of what is happening? What kinds of behaviors do those who are "slumbering" engage in versus those who are walking in the light and aware of the time?

What does this passage say to you individually and to your congregation collectively about how you are preparing for Christ's return? What changes, if any, do you feel prompted to make?

**B** Create a chart

Materials: newsprint and marker, alarm clock (or timer) set to ring during this part of the session and hidden from view, ribbon, scissors, and pins

Read aloud Romans 13:11-14.

Use newsprint to make a chart showing the works of darkness, as identified in verse 13, on the left side of the page. You may want to use words from several translations so as to capture nuances of meanings. Encourage group members to list examples of ways that they believe Christians are called to "put on the armor of light" (verse 12). Write these ideas on the right side of the newsprint.

Stop the discussion when the alarm sounds and ask group members to describe their response to this unexpected intrusion. Perhaps some will comment on the reactions of others, such as seeing people jump or make a face. Relate their responses to how they might respond when the day of the Lord comes.

Distribute ribbon and a pin to each person. Ask them to shape the ribbons however they choose, cutting them to whatever size they would like, and then pin them on their clothing as a symbol that they have "put on" Christ.

Invite group members to echo these words as you read them, phrase by phrase: "We have put on Christ and pledge to walk in his light, for the day of salvation is nearer than when we first believed."

*To practice watchfulness  
(Matthew 24:36-44).*

**A** Plan a DVD production of Matthew 24:36-44

Materials: newsprint and markers

Choose a volunteer to read Matthew 24:36-44. Discuss the following questions, using information from the Bible Background as helpful to augment the discussion:

What do the three images that Jesus gives in verses 38-41 have in common? (Note that people are going about their ordinary business.)

How do you respond to the idea of Jesus as a thief in the night? Why is it important for believers to be watchful at all times?

How do you understand what Jesus is saying here about the need for watchfulness? What evidence can you give to support your answer?

Form teams of three to five. Tell the teams that they have been contracted to create a DVD illustrating this passage. Their finished product should convince viewers of the truth of Jesus' message and motivate them to act.

Suggest that group members answer the following questions, which you will write on newsprint and post, in order to "pitch" their movie to the rest of the group later in the session. Provide newsprint and a marker for each group.

What is the main point of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:36-44? How could you make the same point using contemporary images and examples? What kind of music, or specific selections, would you have playing in the background?

Who would you hire to act in your production? What roles would they play?

What special effects might you use? Why do you think these would be effective?



What scene would you use to create a sneak preview?

Bring the group back together. Provide time for each group to pitch its production.

Wrap up this portion of the session by asking group members to tell a partner how Jesus' words and thoughts of a modern version of this biblical passage motivate them to "keep awake" (verse 42).

## **B** Make an Advent wreath

Materials: paper, pencils, live greens, Styrofoam ring, candles (three blue or purple, one pink, one white pillar candle), florist wires, cutters, optional pine cones, matches

Ask group members to turn to Matthew 24:36-44 and review Jesus' words.

Distribute paper and pencils, and invite each group members to write dialogues between themselves and Jesus. In this dialogue they may make any comments or raise questions concerning his second coming. Suggest that they listen to hear what Christ might have to say to them in response. Tell them to be honest, as they will not be asked to share their thoughts with others. Call the group back together.

Point out that the Advent wreath has been used to help believers keep track of time as we journey through the Advent season. Provide an opportunity for group members to make at least one Advent wreath that will be used during the session each week. (If the group is large, try to provide supplies for several wreaths so more people may participate.) Starting with a Styrofoam base, attach greens, possibly using florist wire. Add three blue or purple candles and one pink one by pressing them into the Styrofoam about an

equal distance apart. Decorate with pine cones. Set the white pillar candle in the center.

Give the following information as group members work: Purple, also used during Lent, symbolized penance. More recently, blue, the liturgical color of hope, has frequently been used during Advent. Candles are used in the wreath because they remind us that Jesus is the light of the world, the one who illuminates the darkness.

The Advent wreath is normally lit moving in a clockwise direction, with the third week being the pink candle. Sometimes the candles are given names as follows. You may discover other names as well.

- To remind us of the prophets who long ago foretold Jesus' birth, the first candle is sometimes called the Prophecy Candle or the Hope Candle.
- The second candle, referred to as the Bethlehem Candle or the Love Candle, brings to mind the manger in which the newborn Child was laid.
- The third week we add the Shepherd's Candle or the Joy Candle, which is generally pink to symbolize the Advent Rose. The third Sunday has long been known as Gaudete ("rejoice") Sunday, for we rejoice in the Lord.
- The fourth candle, the Angel's Candle or the Peace Candle, prompts us to look toward Jesus' coming.
- On Christmas Eve, we light the white Christ Candle, which stands in the center of the wreath and is usually taller than the others.

Use the litany for the first week in "How to Use This Leader Guide" to light the Advent wreath. Leave the first candle lit until you have finished this session, and then carefully extinguish it.

*To reflect on preparedness for Advent.*

## **A** Worship together

Materials: hymnals, paper, and pencils

Invite group members to read responsively Psalm 122. Then sing "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus."

Provide quiet time for group members to reflect on the psalm and the hymn, particularly as these relate to the other Scriptures you have explored today. Distribute paper and pencils so group members can record their thoughts.

Pray the prayer for the first Sunday in Advent found in "How to Use This Leader's Guide."

Commission group members with these words: "Go forth to walk in the light as you await the promised fulfillment of the reign of God."

## **B** Make a commitment

Direct group members' attention to the eighth paragraph under "The Thief Is Coming to Town" in the student book.

Ask group members to choose partners (or form groups of three) and make a commitment to work together during Advent to hold each other accountable and to pray for each another.

Allow time for the partners (or teams) to meet and perhaps agree on a time when they will pray for each other each day. They may also want to have weekly telephone conversations or exchange e-mails to report on how they are getting ready for the coming of the Lord.

Invite group members to repeat these words of the early church adapted from Revelation 22:7, 20: "Jesus the Christ said, 'See, I am coming soon!' Amen. . . . Come, Lord Jesus!" We your people anxiously await your return.



## WHAT TIME IS IT?

The answer to this question depends upon whom you ask. Retail shops have been decorated for Christmas since before Halloween. November 23, 2007—the day after Thanksgiving—marks the official beginning of the Christmas shopping season. On that day, Santas are ensconced on thrones in malls around the country waiting for children with carefully considered lists to announce what they want to find under the tree on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Familiar carols blare from store sound systems and car radios. Yes, Christmas has surely arrived. Depending on where you live, maybe all you need is a dusting of snow to enliven your holiday spirit. For these few weeks of the year, there is an outpouring of goodwill and hospitality. So, in a real sense, Christmas as our culture embodies it is a good time.

Let's be honest, though: Christmas as the American public knows it is a blatantly commercial holiday. The day after Thanksgiving is known as Black Friday because retailers have visions of dollar bills—preferably fifties and hundreds—dancing in their heads. Many businesses count on these final weeks of the year to turn red ink into black ink on their balance sheets, and consumers are quite eager to help them do that. However, is this what the four weeks leading up to Christmas are all about—carols, cards, cookies, and presents that many shoppers will be paying for far into the new year and long after the gifts have lost their luster?

Admittedly, church members are also buying gifts and making all the usual holiday preparations. For us, however, the four weeks before Christmas are not (or should not be) a frantic time to do all we have to do before Christmas morning. We are not celebrating Christmas as much as we are focusing on Advent.

The Latin word from which we get the English word *advent* means “coming” or “arrival.” Perhaps you were taught, as I was, that what we

are waiting for is the coming of Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” in human form. To me, even as a child, that explanation seemed a bit strange because I knew Jesus had come in the flesh 2,000 years ago. How could I anticipate his coming, knowing that he had already come, been crucified, and resurrected?

The fact of the matter is that Advent helps us not only to prepare to commemorate Jesus’ human birth but also—and perhaps more importantly—to anticipate his return. What we are expecting during Advent is not a beginning but an end, one that recognizes the purpose of Jesus’ coming. The way we look at time during Advent differs from our usual understanding. As we move through this season, we begin with the future and conclude with the past. Each of the weeks of Advent has a specific focus as highlighted by our lectionary readings.

The first week in Advent spotlights the need for preparedness. We must watch and wait for Jesus’ second coming. Whereas there are those who make bold claims about when this return will be, Jesus makes clear that only God knows the time (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32). While we continue with the ordinary business of living as we await his return, we, like the people represented in the readings on the first Sunday, are to long for righteousness and act with justice.

The second week moves us back in time in relation to Jesus’ life. Last week we heard him teaching near the end of his ministry. This week we hear John the Baptizer even before Jesus begins his earthly work. John’s promise is that one who is righteous will soon be coming. In his words we find the promise of justice and hope for the dawn of a new era.

In the third week John the Baptizer again takes center stage. In the reading from Matthew 11, Jesus speaks highly of John, whose purpose was to point people toward Jesus. We rejoice as we look from John the messenger to Jesus, who ushered in the reign of God.

The final Sunday of Advent brings us closest in time to our own day. On this day we hear about the Child enfleshed in Mary. This Child, truly God and truly human, will soon be present with us.

As you journey through this Advent season, remember that although the Israelites waited faithfully for God’s gift of the Messiah, we do not approach Christmas as if Christ has not yet been born. We know not only that he has come in the flesh but also that he died and was resurrected by the power and grace of God. Our view of the season stretches back to the Israelites’ anticipation, recalls the coming-in-the-flesh of the Messiah, and peers into the future to rejoice as we prepare for and longingly await Christ’s return.

## LITANIES FOR LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

For the lighting of an Advent wreath, you may wish to use a ready-made wreath or follow directions under “Keeping Track of Time” on December 2<sup>nd</sup> to encourage group members to create a wreath for the group. Note the information in that session as to possible meanings for each week’s candles.

Prepare to lead the candlelighting yourself, or choose a volunteer each week to do so. The leader(s) will need to refer to the following information:

*Week One:* The Prophecy or Hope Candle

Ask a volunteer to light the first blue or purple candle.

Read Isaiah 60:2-3.

Sing the first stanza (and second stanza, optional) of “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light.”

*Week Two:* The Bethlehem or Love Candle

Ask a volunteer to light the first blue or purple candle.

Read Isaiah 11:1-2.

Ask a volunteer to light the second blue or purple candle.

Sing stanzas 1 and 2 of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”



*Week Three: The Shepherd's or Joy Candle*

Ask a volunteer to light the first and second blue or purple candles.

Read Isaiah 35:10.

Ask a volunteer to light the pink candle.

Sing stanzas 3 and 4 of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

*Week Four: The Angel's or Peace Candle*

Ask a volunteer to light the first and second blue or purple candles and the pink candle.

Read Matthew 1:20b-23.

Ask a volunteer to light the fourth blue or purple candle.

Sing "Emmanuel, Emmanuel."

*Christmas Eve: The Christ Candle*  
Ask a volunteer to light the first and second blue or purple candle the pink candle, and the fourth blue or purple candle.

Read Luke 2:4-7.

Ask a volunteer to light the white Christ candle.

Sing the first stanza of "Once in Royal David's City."

## Meet the Writer



Nan Duerling has been writing and editing curriculum resources for youth and adults since 1984. Nan has been the editor of *The New International Lesson Annual* for 14 years. She has made contributions to resources such as *Mature Years*, *Seasons of the Spirit*, *Leader in the Church School Today*, and *Bible Lessons for Youth*. As a member of the Committee on the Uniform Series of the National Council of Churches, she participated in the development of the annual cycles for the *International Lesson Series* and worked with the youth team as a consultant. Currently, she teaches the Bible and Life adult Sunday school class at Linthicum Heights United Methodist Church, where she also chairs the child-care center committee and serves on the administrative board. Nan teaches in the Course of Study School at Washington Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.

Nan and her husband, Craig, live in Crownsville, Maryland. Their household includes a mom, Ruth; Craig's mom, Helen; and two energetic Curly-Coated Retrievers, Ada and Bentley. The Duerlings and their dogs do pet therapy as registered Pet Partners. They find visiting hospital patients and working with children to develop a love of reading rewarding. Nan is on the board of directors of National Capital Therapy Dogs, Inc., an affiliate of the Delta Society. The Duerlings also enjoy genealogical research and have made several trips to Germany to trace their distant ancestors. They frequent the gym, where Nan is an avid indoor cyclist.

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